

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
RESEARCH AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS ADMINISTRATION
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
49 CFR Parts 192 and 195
[Docket No. RSPA-97-3001]
RIN 2137 AC54
PIPELINE SAFETY: PERIODIC UNDERWATER INSPECTIONS

I. Description of the Action

This environmental assessment concerns a proposed regulation that would amend the pipeline safety regulations to require operators of gas and hazardous liquid pipelines to have procedures for periodic inspections of pipeline facilities in waters less than 15 feet deep offshore or crossing under a navigable waterway. These inspections would ensure that the pipeline is not exposed or a hazard to navigation.

II. Need for the Action

The Research and Special Programs Administration's (RSPA) Office of Pipeline Safety (OPS) is responsible for ensuring adequate safety and environmental protection for the risks posed by the nation's approximately 2 million miles of gas and hazardous liquid pipelines. Twice in the late 1980's in the Gulf of Mexico, fishing vessels struck offshore gas pipelines. These incidents resulted in the deaths of 13 fishermen. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation of these incidents cited among the causes the pipeline operators failure to maintain the pipeline at its initial burial depth. Further, NTSB cited RSPA's failure to require pipeline operators to inspect and maintain submerged pipelines in a protected condition. NTSB recommended that RSPA develop and implement requirements to ensure that pipeline operators inspect and maintain submerged pipelines in areas subject to damage by surface vessels.

A joint task force of Federal Agencies was formed to study offshore pipeline issues. The conclusions were similar to those of the NTSB. However, they concluded the problems of underwater buried pipeline were not confined to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Congress in 1990, required that operators of offshore pipeline facilities in the Gulf of Mexico conduct a one-time underwater depth of burial inspection of pipeline facilities and report to the Department of Transportation on any exposed portion of pipeline or any pipeline that would pose a hazard to navigation (49 U.S.C. 2002 Sec 203 (1)(A)). On December 5, 1991, RSPA required that pipeline operators in the Gulf perform a one-time inspection of underwater pipelines that could cause a threat to navigation (56 FR 63764). Over 1,560 miles of pipeline in the Gulf of Mexico were inspected. Approximately 25 miles or less than 2% of the inspected pipeline was reported to be exposed or to be a hazard to navigation.

Congress also required the Department of Transportation to establish a mandatory, systematic and where appropriate, periodic pipeline inspection and reburial program for all shallow water submerged pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1992 Congress further expanded the requirement to include all offshore pipelines, underwater abandoned pipeline facilities, and all facilities which cross under, over, or through navigable waters, if the location could pose a hazard to navigation (Pub. L. 102-508 (49 U.S.C. 1692(h)(3)).

III. Alternatives

1. No Action Alternative

This alternative would mean that no new regulations would be enacted to require pipeline operators who operate offshore in less than 15 feet of water or on navigable waterways that would require periodic inspection and reburial. This is not an acceptable alternative as improperly buried pipeline would continue to pose a safety hazard to navigation.

2. Regulatory Alternative.

This alternative would propose a regulation that would amend the pipeline safety regulations to require operators of gas and hazardous liquid pipelines to have procedures for periodic inspections of pipeline facilities in waters less than 15 feet deep offshore or crossing under a navigable waterway. This is the chosen alternative and will be discussed in the remainder of this analysis.

IV. The Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences of the Action

The affected environment is the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) and the navigable waterways of the United States. There is no environmental consequences of this proposal as it only requires operators to check to ensure that their pipelines are properly buried underwater. Under current regulation, if the pipelines are discovered by any person to not be properly buried, the operator is required to take the appropriate actions. This rule would require the operator to have an appropriate procedure to ensure that they are made aware of potentially hazardous situations.

V. List of Contacts

RSPA will solicit public comment on this EA. No comments have been solicited from the public to date.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the above considerations, RSPA has determined that there are no significant environmental impacts associated with this action.